



## Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

# RESEARCH BRIEF

| JUNE 2013 | CSD PUBLICATION NO. 13-14 |

## International Volunteering from the United States between 2004 and 2012

by Benjamin J. Lough<sup>1</sup>

Between 800,000 and 1,100,000 individuals in the US reported volunteering internationally each year from 2004 to 2012. Young, White college graduates with higher incomes, those who were employed, and married people were the most frequent international volunteers, the majority of whom served with a religious organization.

Data for this report were gathered from the volunteer supplements to the Current Population Survey (CPS)—a monthly survey of approximately 60,000 households—from September 2004 through September 2012.

The volunteer supplement includes questions about domestic and international service performed. Two items specifically assess the rate and frequency of international volunteer service. (See Appendix 1 for more detailed information about sampling, definitions, and analysis.)

### Prevalence and Service Duration

The number of international volunteers peaked in 2007 and slumped in 2009. Although the number of volunteers increased slightly between 2009 and 2011, the rate fell again in 2012 (Figure 1 and Table 1). In 2012, 877,820 people reported volunteering internationally—approximately the same number that volunteered internationally in 2004. The volunteer supplements do not measure service duration specifically, but of those who reported spending most or all of their volunteering time abroad, 45% spent two weeks or less. (For a full breakdown, see Table 2.)

Figure 1. Number (in Thousands) of International Volunteers from 2004 to 2012

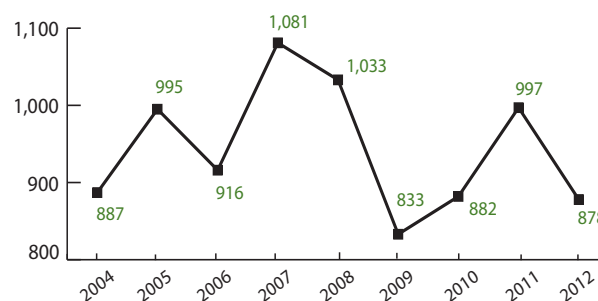


Table 1. Frequency of International Volunteers from 2004 to 2012

Year	Frequency
2004	887,120
2005	995,086
2006	915,923
2007	1,080,981
2008	1,032,780
2009	832,668
2010	881,797
2011	996,899
2012	877,820



Washington University in St. Louis

**Table 2. Total Duration of Volunteering for Those who Completed All or Almost All of Their Volunteer Time Internationally from 2007 to 2012**

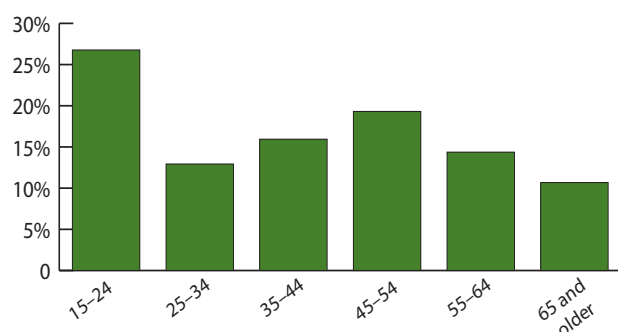
	Frequency	Percentage
Less than 1 week	19,636	1.4
1-2 weeks	617,991	42.9
3-4 weeks	251,616	17.5
5-9 weeks	124,611	8.7
10-26 weeks	217,131	15.1
More than 26 weeks	209,355	14.5

## Prevalence by Selected Demographics

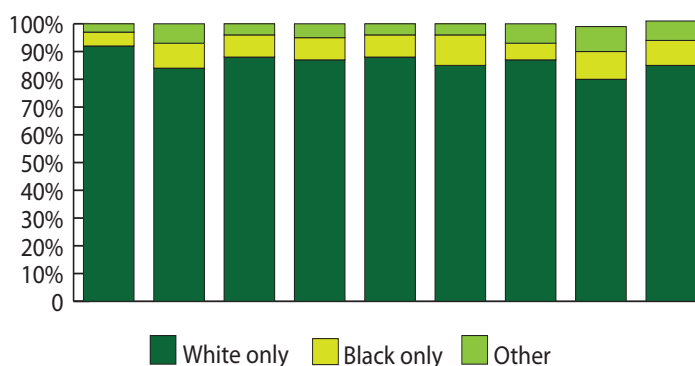
### Gender

Between 2004 and 2012, slightly more women reported volunteering internationally than men (52% and 48%, respectively). However, because women volunteer more frequently than men in the US (58% and 42%, respectively), the disparity is lower for international volunteering than for domestic volunteering. Among those who volunteered at all, men were more likely than women to volunteer abroad.<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 2. International Volunteers by Age Group from 2004 to 2012**



**Figure 4. Percentage of International Volunteers by Racial Group from 2004 to 2012**



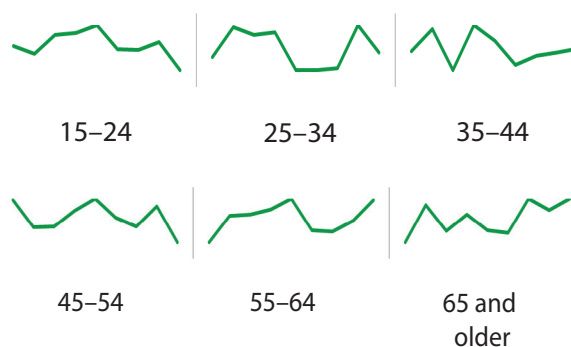
### Age

From 2004 to 2012, young people aged 15 to 24 years volunteered internationally most frequently (26%), followed by those aged 45 to 54 years (20%) (Figure 2). Participation of older adults 65 years or older had the greatest growth from 2008 to 2012, increasing from around 73,000 in 2008 to around 127,000 in 2012, an increase of about 74%. Adults aged 55 to 64 years also showed significant growth from 102,000 in 2004 to around 161,000 in 2012, an increase of about 58%. Conversely, the number of young people aged 15 to 24 volunteering between 2004 and 2012 declined from more than 240,000 in 2004 to around 170,000 in 2012, a decrease of nearly 40%. Figure 3 uses sparklines to illustrate trends in international volunteering by different age groups.

### Race and Ethnicity

From 2004 to 2012, considerably more White individuals reported volunteering abroad (87%) than those in other racial groups (13%). There does not appear to be a clear trend in volunteering year to year by racial group, though the most diverse cohort of volunteers (nearly 20%) appears to have served in 2011 (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Sparkline Trends of Age Groups from 2004 to 2012**



## Marital Status and Dependent Children

More than half of volunteers were married (55%), and about three in ten (36%) were single and never married (Figure 5). The remaining 9% were divorced, separated, or widowed. Three in four volunteers (76%) did not have children younger than 18 years of age living in the household.

## Education Level

Volunteers with higher levels of education were more likely to volunteer abroad.<sup>3</sup> About one quarter (27%) of all international volunteers had a bachelor's degree (Figure 6). An additional quarter (24%) had an advanced master's, professional, or doctorate degree. Three of four volunteers (75%) had at least some college. Among the 25% who had not started college, half (50%) were younger than 24 years old.

Figure 5. International Volunteers by Marital Status from 2004 to 2012

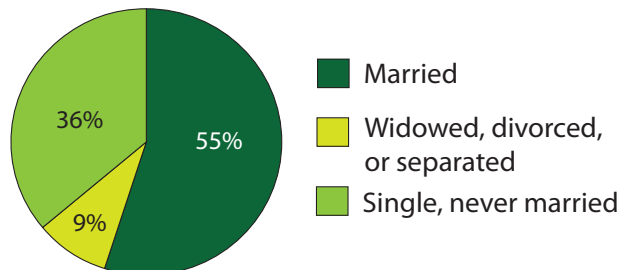
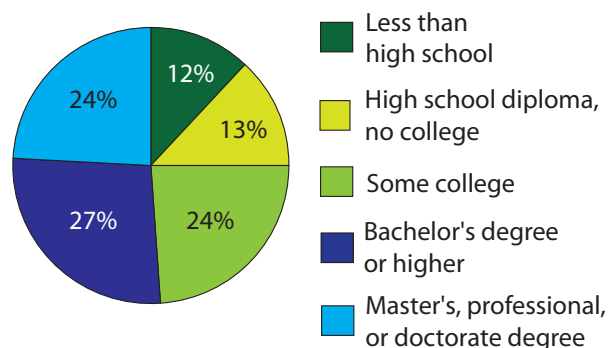


Figure 6. International Volunteers by Education Level from 2004 to 2012



## Employment Status

Almost seven of ten volunteers (68%) were employed part- or full-time (Figure 7). Only a small number of unemployed persons (4%) volunteered abroad. The remaining 28% of international volunteers were retired, disabled, or otherwise not in the labor force. Of those unemployed, 40% were younger than 24 years old. In addition, 70% of international volunteers aged 16-24 years were students.

## Household Income

Higher household income was a significant predictor of international volunteer status (Figure 8).<sup>4</sup> Nearly one in three (30%) lived in households earning incomes of \$100,000 or more, and nearly seven of ten (63%) lived in households earning more than \$50,000 per year. Although 9% of volunteers came from households earning less than \$20,000 per year, many of these low-income volunteers (40%) were

Figure 7. International Volunteers by Employment Status from 2004 to 2012

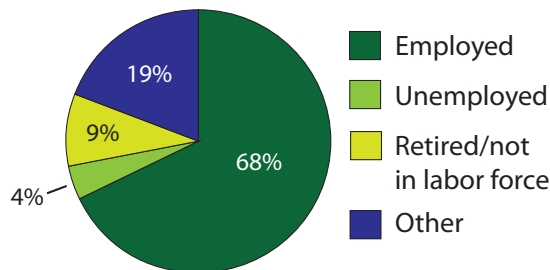
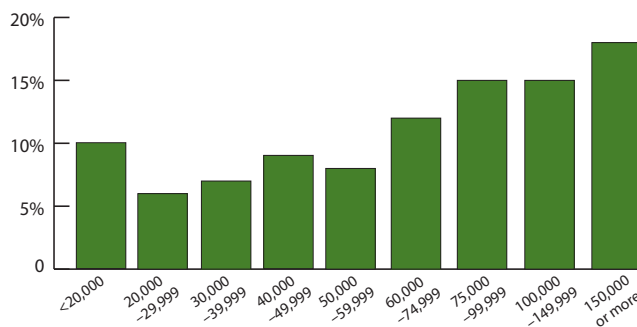


Figure 8. International Volunteers by Household Income from 2004 to 2012



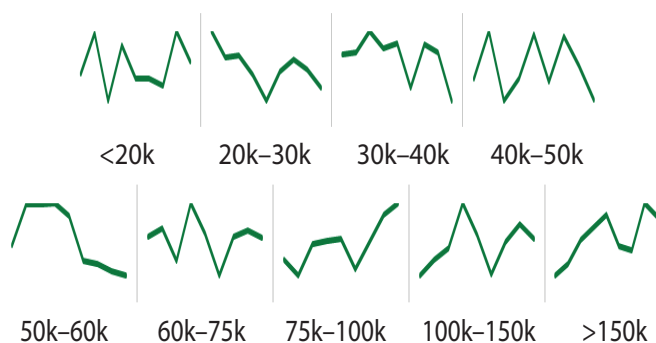
under 24 years old. Moreover, 73% of volunteers younger than age 24 in these lowest income households were students. Figure 9 uses sparklines to illustrate trends in international volunteering by different levels of household income. Volunteers from higher income households (\$75,000 and up) appear to have an overall increasing trend, while volunteers from lower income households (\$20,000 to \$40,000) appear to have an overall decreasing trend.

## Number and Types of Organizations Sponsoring Volunteers

Respondents were asked the type of organization with which they volunteered, but it was impossible to isolate the type of organization by type of volunteer experience (i.e., domestic or international). To mitigate the issue, this section presents data only from those who reported spending “all or almost all” of their time volunteering internationally (Table 3). Of those, 45% volunteered with a religious organization (Table 4). This figure is significantly higher than for those who reported volunteering domestically only (35%).<sup>5</sup> Social or community service organizations accounted for the next most frequent type at 11%, followed closely by volunteering in hospital, clinic, or healthcare organizations at 9%.

Types of activities performed in the international volunteer’s main organization varied widely (Table 5). The most common activities of volunteers who spent all or almost of their time volunteering abroad included behaviors that do not require high professional skills, such as tutoring or teaching (27%), engaging in general labor (26%), and mentoring youth (26%).

**Figure 9: Sparklines Trends of International Volunteers by Income from 2004 to 2012**



**Table 3. Total Proportion of All Volunteer Time Spent Internationally among Those who Volunteered Internationally from 2007 to 2012**

	Frequency	Percentage
Very little	2,025,114	35.5
Less than half	1,205,400	21.1
About half	507,925	8.9
More than half	413,724	7.3
All or almost all	1,526,104	26.8
Do not know or refused	24,677	0.4

**Table 4. Type of Main Organization for Volunteers who Spent All or Almost All of Their Time Volunteering Internationally from 2007 to 2012**

Type of Organization	Frequency	Percentage
Religious organization	692,657	45.4
Social and community service organization	164,245	10.8
Hospital, clinic, or healthcare organization	131,218	8.6
Children’s educational or sports organization	128,240	8.4
International organization	78,798	5.2
Some other type of organization	61,194	4.0
Other educational group	57,145	3.7
Health research or health education organization	54,274	3.6
Youth services group	38,788	2.5
Environmental or animal care	23,814	1.6
Cultural or arts organization	14,436	0.9
Civic organization	13,114	0.9
Political party or advocacy organization	7,891	0.5
Immigrant/refugee assistance organization	5,297	0.3
Sports or hobby group	6,751	0.4
Missing	48,241	3.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>8,501,074</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 5. Type of Activities Completed by the Main Organization from 2007 to 2012\*

	Yes	Percentage
Tutor or teach	409,862	26.9
Engage in general labor	402,143	26.4
Mentor youth	388,754	25.5
Provide counseling, medical care, or protective services	323,399	21.2
Collect, prepare, distribute, or serve food	267,940	17.6
Collect, make, or distribute clothing, crafts, or goods	248,073	16.3
Fundraise or sell items to raise money	227,359	14.9
Provide professional or management assistance	151,506	9.9
Engage in music, performance, or other artistic activities	141,630	9.3
Provide general office services	128,433	8.4
Provide information or be an usher, greeter, or minister	114,894	7.5
Any other type of activity	249,264	16.3

\*Categories are not mutually exclusive.

## Summary and Conclusion

Each year, approximately one million individuals reported volunteering abroad with marginal fluctuations year to year. It appears that annual fluctuations in volunteer rates may be associated with the national economy, but more research is needed. Available data make it difficult to determine the type of organization that sponsored the volunteer experience and the activities that volunteers performed. Thus, this report provides a limited picture of international volunteer service among the U.S. population and the characteristics of those who engage in international volunteerism.

Young people aged 24 and younger were most likely to volunteer internationally, but their participation has decreased significantly since 2004. In contrast, the number of older adult volunteers has increased since 2004. Opportunities or incentives to volunteer may have changed over this period, including a greater variety of alternatives for young adults, such as service as part of study abroad programs in higher education institutions.<sup>6</sup>

Less volunteering abroad by people with lower incomes may indicate less access to international volunteer service. Individuals with the highest volunteer rates were under 24 years old, had no dependent children at home, and made less than \$20,000. About 30% of those in this group were

students. An increasing trend of volunteers from households making \$75,000 or more suggests that international volunteering may be becoming more exclusive or expensive or that there may be other social and economic factors influencing these trends.

Higher education was strongly associated with service abroad. Those in college may have had greater exposure to international volunteer opportunities or may simply have stronger motivations to engage in international service. Most of those who volunteered abroad but did not have college experience were in the youngest age category; thus, one could deduce they were still in high school or had not yet entered college.

Although demographic data offer a description of volunteers, indicators from the CPS on types of organizational sponsors and volunteer activities are not sufficient to draw conclusions. The ability to associate these variables with the type of volunteer experience would improve understanding of international volunteerism in the U.S. population and establish a benchmark from which to study volunteer status, form, and function over time. Overall, more specific data are essential for understanding the field, identifying dimensions for further study, and generating implications for program and policy development.



## Endnotes

1. The author is an assistant professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a faculty associate with the Center for Social Development at Washington University in St. Louis. He gratefully acknowledges Tiffany Trautwein for her editorial assistance.
2. After factoring in sampling bias among those who volunteer, men were more likely to volunteer internationally ( $\chi^2 = 127$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 1$ ).
3.  $\text{Wald}\chi^2 = 16.74$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $df = 1$
4.  $\text{Wald}\chi^2 = 7.32$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $df = 1$
5. Corporation for National & Community Service. (2012, December). *Volunteering and civic life in America: Key findings on the volunteer participation and civic health of the nation*. Retrieved from <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/assets/resources/factsheetfinal.pdf>
6. Institute of International Education. (2012). *Open doors: Report on international educational exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors>
7. <http://www.census.gov/cps/methodology/tech-docs.html>
8. <http://www.census.gov/aprd/techdoc/cps/cps-main.html>

## Appendix 1. Methodological Notes

### Sampling

Data from the volunteer supplement of the CPS are collected from nearly 60,000 households during one week in September each year. All members of surveyed households are asked about their volunteer activities for the previous year. Those who answer “yes” to whether they volunteered are asked if any of their volunteer work took place outside the United States or its territories. Because the CPS is designed to obtain information about all members in a household, about 70% of responses are self-reports, and the remaining 30% of responses are answered by another member of the household in proxy for inaccessible respondents.

Statistics obtained from the CPS contain both sampling and non-sampling error caused by data collection methods. A more detailed analysis of sampling error—including specific parameters for computing the standard error of various demographic characteristics—can be found under attachment 16 of the CPS supplement file for each year.<sup>7</sup>

### Definitions

*Volunteers* in this report include civilian non-institutional individuals older than 15 years of age who self-reported performing unpaid activities in an organization outside of the US and its territories at any time in the year before the survey was taken. *Voluntary activities* include unpaid labor (excluding expenses) specific to a formal organization (see Table 5). An *organization* includes one of 13 categories of structured groups that share a common goal (see Table 4). The organization under which the volunteers spent the majority of their voluntary activities during the year is classified as the *main organization*. If the individual volunteered for more than one organization, activities performed for the main organization may not necessarily refer to volunteer activities outside of the US.

### Analysis

Tables were constructed by crossing the international volunteerism variable with sample demographic variables and volunteer variables. Frequency, type, and length of volunteer activities include only those respondents who reported that they had volunteered internationally. Tables that cover specific demographic characteristics include positive and negative responses to the question about international volunteerism.

Raw data were cleaned and recoded as categorized in the tables and weighted with the CPS volunteer supplement non-response weight based on the standard CPS weighting program to account for non-interviewed households and population distribution ratios. Final values as reported in the tables were weighted to approximate U.S. population parameters for individuals volunteering for an organization in a foreign country. A more detailed description of weighting issues can be found under attachment two of the CPS supplement file for each year.<sup>8</sup>

## Appendix 2. Number (in Thousands) and Percentage of Those over Age 15 who Volunteered Abroad from 2004 to 2012 (Weighted CPS Volunteer Supplement Data)

Categorical variable	Volunteered internationally <sup>1</sup>		Categorical variable	Volunteered internationally <sup>1</sup>	
	Frequency	Percentage		Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender</i>			<i>Dependent child status</i>		
Male	4,112,087	48.4	Not a parent	2,402,562	28.3
Female	4,388,987	51.6	All children are 18 years or older	4,058,356	47.7
<i>Age group</i>			One or more children under 18 years	2,040,156	24.0
15-24	2,201,244	25.9	<i>Employment status</i>		
25-34	1,134,785	13.3	Employed	5,757,819	67.7
35-44	1,350,689	15.9	Unemployed	339,621	4.0
45-54	1,670,047	19.6	Retired/not in labor force	807,314	9.5
55-64	1,218,850	14.3	Otherwise not in labor force	1,596,319	18.8
65 and older	925,458	10.9	<i>Student status<sup>4</sup></i>		
<i>Race</i>			Not in 16-24 age range	6,471,777	76.1
White only	7,331,769	86.2	Student	1,416,978	16.7
Black only	460,104	5.4	Non-student	612,319	7.2
Other	709,201	8.3	<i>Income level<sup>5</sup></i>		
<i>Educational attainment</i>			< \$20,000	748,173	8.8
Less than high school	967,494	11.4	\$20,000-\$29,999	489,412	5.8
High school diploma, no college <sup>2</sup>	1,083,251	12.7	\$30,000-\$39,999	581,566	6.8
Some college <sup>3</sup>	2,055,285	24.2	\$40,000-\$49,999	683,145	8.0
Bachelor's degree or higher	2,325,908	27.4	\$50,000-\$59,999	658,553	7.7
Master's, professional, or doctoral	2,069,137	24.3	\$60,000-\$74,999	935,227	11.0
<i>Marital status</i>			\$75,000-\$99,999	1,194,695	14.1
Single, never married	3,056,392	36.0	\$100,000-\$149,999	1,155,248	13.6
Married	4,694,187	55.2	\$150,000 or more	1,403,663	16.5
Divorced, separated, widowed	750,495	8.8			

1. Numbers may not sum to totals because of rounding.

2. Includes high school diploma or equivalent GED.

3. Includes associate's degree or no degree.

4. Student status is indicated only for volunteers aged 16-24.

5. Represents combined income of all family members in the household.

## Author

Benjamin J. Lough  
CSD Faculty Associate  
Assistant Professor  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
bjlough@illinois.edu

## Contact Us

Amanda Moore McBride  
ammcbride@wustl.edu  
(314) 935-9778

Center for Social Development  
George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Washington University in St. Louis  
Campus Box 1196  
One Brookings Drive  
St. Louis, MO 63130

[csd.wustl.edu](http://csd.wustl.edu)



Washington University in St. Louis

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

### CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

George Warren Brown School of Social Work  
Campus Box 1196  
One Brookings Drive  
St. Louis, Missouri 63130-4899